

GAZELLE

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مجموعة دبي للتاريخ الطبيعي

DUBAI NATURAL HISTORY GROUP

PO Box 9234, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Members' News

Through A Long Hot Summer

Stephen Green, although pleading overwork due to the economic downturn, nevertheless continues to find time for amateur natural history. Resident in England but still in touch, he recently found and reported some odd but apparently extensive occurrences of early stone tools at a site being excavated for improved amenities within a famous English park.

Chairman **Gary Feulner** thinks he is nearing the finish line on a study of distinctive aspects of the flora of the *Ru'us al-Jibal* (the high peaks of the Musandam peninsula), a project which builds on many years of observations. Recently, Gary's efforts have helped Dr. Norbert Kilian, of the Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem, to resolve the status of several species of Asteraceae (the daisy family) in the UAE and northern Oman. Dr. Kilian's conclusions will be published in an upcoming volume of *Flora of Arabia*.

In June, one of our members photographed a dragonfly on an aloe in a very dry garden on Al Wasl Road, at least half a kilometre from Safa Park. The photograph was sent to

Gary Feulner who sent his comments through to *Gazelle*. "The Al Wasl Road dragonfly is a female *Trithemis annulata*, the purple-blushed darter. Males have a decidedly violet or purple-blushed abdomen. Preferred habitat (at least in our area) is medium to large bodies of still, but clear, water. I have seen it in urban and suburban Dubai at, for example, the lakes in Safa Park and at Emirates Towers. Females perch away from the water bodies unless they want to visit to feed or breed. Still, it's unusual to see them perched by the roadside."



Trithemis annulata

DNHG Membership Renewal Time

DNHG Membership remains a bargain at Dhs.100 for couples and Dh. 50 for singles. You can join or renew at our meetings or by sending us your details and a cheque made out to: Lloyds TSB Bank account no. 60600669933501. (Please note we cannot cash cheques made out to the DNHG. Please also note our account number has changed.) Subscriptions paid now are good through to September 2010.

DNHG membership entitles you to participate in field trips and helps pay for our lecture hall, publication and distribution of our monthly newsletter, the *Gazelle*, additions to our library, incidental expenses of speakers and occasional special projects.

This month's Contributors

The Editor would like to thank the following for their reports and contributions:

Angela Manthorpe
Nancy Papathanasopoulou
Hussein Al-Qallaf
Martin Gaethlich
Aris Vidalis
Colin Murray
Binish Roobas
Gary Feulner
Diane Lewis
Stephan Beck
Willy & Helga Meyer



Under the patronage of H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan



Coming up ...

A varied programme of field trips is planned for the coming cool weather, and prior to that some close-handly, in-the-shade outings. We welcome your suggestions and help - don't hesitate to put forward your ideas and offer to lead trips. Contact the Field Trip Coordinators listed on p. 7.

DNHG Field Trip Policies

Members are reminded that DNHG field trips are cooperative ventures among the participants, for their mutual benefit and enjoyment. DNHG field trip leaders are not normally professionals or experts, but fellow members who have agreed to share their time and their knowledge with other participants, on a volunteer basis. The relationship of trip leaders and participants is that of co-venturers, not professional and client. For these reasons field trip participation is limited to DNHG members and their bona fide non-resident guests.



Shelling on 'Black Palace Beach'
Photograph by Diane Lewis

Various dangers are inherent in travel in and around the UAE and in the exploration of the natural environment, whether by automobile, by boat, on foot or otherwise, and whether on-road or off-road, in the cities or countryside, in the mountains or deserts or at sea. By participating in DNHG field trips, members accept these risks, and they accept responsibility for their own safety and welfare. Field trip participants are normally required to sign a waiver form to this effect. Without these understandings, the DNHG would be unable

to sponsor field trips or to recruit volunteers to lead them.



Musandam mountain hike
Photograph by Stephan Beck

Field trips vary in both format and organisation, depending on the nature of the trip, the number of participants, and the preferences of the field trip leader. If the number of participants is limited and sign-up is required, members should make every effort to honour their commitments or to give timely notice otherwise, as a courtesy both to the trip leader and to other members who might like to have the chance to participate.

DNHG Library Open for Use

Members are reminded that the DNHG library collection is now open for reference use within the library at the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, where our monthly lectures are held. The library is upstairs in the main building, to the left, in the back of the building. (Lectures are now more often in the lecture theatres to the left of the main carpark.) The DNHG collection is in a cabinet in the library's utility room.

Access to the DNHG collection and the library's reading room is permitted during regular opening hours. The EAHM Library hours are Sundays to Thursdays, 9AM to 9PM. Fridays and Saturdays closed.

Members must present their DNHG membership card to the receptionist in the EAHM lobby in order to access the library on the first floor, and again to their librarian, Farook, or the duty library

technician. As a precaution, it is advised to phone (04 315 5145) in advance to be sure that there is not a meeting taking place in the workroom.



Photograph, uncredited, from *Gazelle*, June 1998. It was taken during a field trip to the Ru'us Al Jibal, and is an example of the treasures housed in the DNHG library

Our Next Speaker

Steve James is a lifelong bird-watcher, whose love for birds, birding and wild places is infectious to those around him. He has travelled extensively throughout the world, amassing a world list of just over 4,600 species. He has been resident in the UAE since 1992 and his UAE list is over 400 species. He is a member of the Emirates Bird Records Committee, and he is available as a bird-guide on trips throughout the Emirates and into Oman. Between birding trips, Steve is the Senior Environmental Protection Officer for ADCO.

Steve is a Bish Brown Award winner and past Chairman of the ENHG and continues to give illustrated talks from time to time. He has a house on a game reserve in South Africa, a wonderful spot to observe and photograph wildlife. He took a trip earlier this year to the extreme north east of India, and that will be the topic of his October lecture to the DNHG.



Email your field reports and news to pvana@emirates.net.ae (Arial 10 justified). Please send your photographs as separate jpg files, or deliver them to Anne Millen for scanning.

Summer Near the City: Dubai Pivot Fields

2009 has been one of the more humid Dubai summers, but if you don't mind dripping while standing still, there is still much to enjoy. The Dubai Pivot Fields, even without migrant birds, rarely fails to please. One early morning visit in mid-July witnessed a squadron of a dozen or more blue-cheeked bee-eaters swarming high overhead, another saw a similar number of cattle egrets marching slowly in parallel through the grass, but in both cases they were gone before the clock struck seven.

The white-tailed plover was relatively new to the UAE in the mid-1990s, associated particularly with the former "Wimpey Pits" where it was considered a potential breeding species. It is now a regular at the Pivot Fields, feeding in the low grass and readily distinguished by its yellow legs. It is believed to have bred there for a number of years. As we walked slowly along the vehicle track at one point, an adult began to circle above us, calling. The bird was obviously serious, but as 'harassment' its performance was ineffective against UAE naturalists inured to the much more raucous and persistent efforts of its relative, the red-wattled plover.



Nesting area of white-tailed plover
Photograph by Gary Feulner

We knew, however, to look for a nest or chicks nearby, and judi-

cious inspection revealed two chicks among the cover of newly planted palms. The spotted, downy chicks, already with incongruously long legs, hunkered down in palm debris and tolerated a few quick photos. The nest and chicks cannot have been unknown to the gardeners who tend the site, so it is comforting to know that the birds have been unmolested, and perhaps even encouraged.



White-tailed plover chick
Photograph by Binish Roobas

Areas adjacent to the grassy fields were frequently alive with butterflies. On sandy areas with mats of *Sesuvium* we saw the western pygmy blue *Brephidium exilis*. Elsewhere, on "weed" species such as *Trianthema portulacastrum* (Family Aizoaceae) or *Tribulus terrestris* (Family Zygophyllaceae) we saw many grass blues, generally fresh and vividly colored, with a number mating and several females observed egg-laying on nearby *Amaranthus* sp.



A dark-spotted 'sport' of the grass blue,
Zizeeria karsandra
Photograph by Binish Roobas

One butterfly was marked with a distinctive black patch more or less centered on the underside of the hindwing. Brief but inconclusive views piqued our interest but subsequent examination of a photograph suggested that it was a mutation or 'sport' of the common grass blue (thought to be the Asian grass blue, *Zizeeria karsandra*). That was

also the view of Torben Larsen, who confirmed that no Lycaenid butterfly was known that had such "black spot" markings. Report by Gary Feulner and Binish Roobas

Milkweed Seed Pod Photo Gallery

Most members will be familiar with the large and attractive milkweed *Calotropis procera*, also known as Sodom's apple. It is particularly common in the low sands of the northern Emirates, especially on waste ground or overgrazed terrain, and flowers through the summer.



Seed pod of *Calotropis procera*
Photograph by Angela Manthorpe

The kidney-shaped fruit or seed pod (technically called a *follicle*) is, when opened (a sticky job), found to contain many scores of small seeds, each attached to a silken ribbon that dries and disaggregates to become a mini-parachute of many splayed, silken threads, ready to catch a breeze and glide for long distances. The other UAE milkweeds follow a similar strategy.



Seed pod of *Calotropis procera* (open to show seeds)
Photograph by Angela Manthorpe



Angela Manthorpe recently encountered the fruits of two other milkweed plants (Family Asclepiadaceae) that are much less common but equally interesting and unforgettable. One is the small, wrinkly leafed *Glossonema varians*.



Seed pod of *Glossonema varians*
Photograph by Angela Manthorpe

The other is the twining dwarf shrub, *Pergularia tomentosa*, which favours disturbed ground and features widely spaced, heart-shaped leaves. Its fruits are typically in pairs.



Seed pod of *Pergularia tomentosa*
Photograph by Angela Manthorpe

A few months later Gary Feulner was able to add photos of two more milkweed pods: the flame-

shaped fruit of the climbing milkweed vine *Pentatropis nivalis* and the elongated fruit of the large, desert-dwelling broom bush *Leptadenia pyrotechnica*.



Seed pod of *Pentatropis nivalis*
Photograph by Gary Feulner



Seed pod of *Leptadenia pyrotechnica*
Photograph by Gary Feulner

Missing from our milkweed photo gallery are the seeds of the UAE's other three milkweeds: the tall, spindly *Periploca aphylla* and the cactus-like *Caralluma arabica* and *Caralluma flava*. Report by Gary Feulner and Angela Manthorpe

Recalled to Life: Ramthah Wetlands

Ramthah wetlands, an area of drainage accumulation (and tidal probably tidal seepage) on the Sharjah-Ajman border, was once one of the UAE's premier bird-watching sites, under the official protection of the government of Sharjah. The imperatives of development were not kind to the site, which suffered the side effects of highway development, powerline installation and dehydration (partly, it must be admitted, due to the cessation of wastewater dumping by tankers).



Ramthah wetlands with powerlines and saline pools
Photograph by Gary Feulner

Plans exist to develop the area in a more sanitised and conventional way as the Al-Wasit Nature Reserve, but these have not progressed to date. In the meantime, nature has taken matters into her own hands. Now the area is home to a small number of characteristic and interesting local species. A few pair of black-winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus* still breed there. Chicks and active nests with speckled eggs could be observed in mid-summer, the nesting parent birds repeatedly dipping their chests in the shallow ponds before returning to their nests to moisten and cool the eggs.



Nest of black-winged stilt at Ramthah wetlands
Photograph by Gary Feulner



Young black-winged stilt at Ramthah wetlands.
Photograph by Binish Roobas



Dubai Natural History Group Recorders

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Marine Life - Lamjed El-Kefi

Geology - Gary Feulner
res 306 5570
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Insects - Gary Feulner

Fossils - Valerie Chalmers
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fax 340 0990
email: valeriechalmers@hotmail.com

Plants - Valerie Chalmers

Seashells - Recorder needed!

The recorders are not necessarily scientific experts in their designated fields. In fact, most are not. However, they are interested and knowledgeable amateurs - please contact them if you have any interesting reports or queries.

The intention is that information will be channelled through to the *Gazelle* editor, so new information can be shared with all our readers.



On the saline ground, cushions of the low, spreading saltbush *Sesuvium* sp. are home to the naturalized western pygmy blue butterfly *Brephidium exilis*, a native of south-western North America that can now be found throughout the UAE and into northernmost Oman (roadside plantings of *Sesuvium* are one of the best places to look).

And in the remaining saline ponds, the small conical Potamidid snail *Cerithideopsis conica* (formerly the more manageable *Potamides conicus*) is hyperabundant. In the UAE, this snail is more common on soft mud in the upper intertidal zone, but elsewhere it is known to inhabit saline ponds even hundreds of kilometres inland, where it is thought to be carried on the webbed feet of wading birds. Adults develop directly from the egg, without a free-swimming larval stage. In fact, it may be ovoviparous (the eggs hatching within the body of the adult); this is apparently not known. In either case it makes a good coloniser.

The site was probably once an estuary of freshwater drainage from the mountains, and it was to this area that floodwaters flowed across the sands from inland in 1987, augmented by the collapse of the old Shuwayb dam. Consistent with that hypothesis, the area includes low shell middens composed of edible gastropods such as *Terebralia palustris* and *Hexaplex kuesterianus* as well as unidentified oysters. *Report by Gary Feulner*

Masirah Island, Oman Part 2 An Exceptional Resident: the Crab Plover

The crab plover (*Dromas ardeola*) is considered to be one of the most extraordinary waders because of what it eats, the nest it builds and its largely nocturnal habits.



Crab plovers
Photograph by Aris Vidalis

At 33–36 cm of body length and with a wingspan of 75–78 cm, it is a beautiful bird that birdwatchers are delighted to spot. It has a very large bill and a heavy head, which seem to be out of proportion to the rest of its body. Its plumage is black and white and on the ground, it somewhat resembles that of the avocet (*Recurvirostra avoceta*, also found in Masirah, usually during spring migration).



Avocet grooming itself
Photograph by Colin Murray



The crab plover's huge bill is
always unmistakable
Photograph by Hussein Al-Qallaf

The crab plover is easily distinguished in flight by its fully black back and flight-feathers. At rest, it carries its head low (like a gull), but when on alert or in flight, it extends it up or forward on a stretched neck. The juvenile has a grey rear crown and plumage of a



duller contrast, lacking the striking pattern of the adult. At all ages, the bill is black, paler at base. The legs are dark-coloured, strong and sturdy.



Crab plover crabbing
Photograph by Aris Vidalis

The crab plover is an essentially maritime wader, occurring on coastal isles, coral reefs and mud- or sandbanks. It nests in dense colonies, in sandy ground close to the sea, usually on islands or coastal dunes. The nest is in a chamber at the end of a tunnel 120–188 cm long, excavated by the birds themselves.



Crab plovers, whimbrels and godwits
in Dawwa
Photograph by Martin Gaethlich

These birds feed in loose groups, almost exclusively on crabs, mostly in the inter-tidal zone, chiefly on mudflats exposed at low tide and sometimes in shallow water. It is generally observed in flocks of rarely less than 20–30 individuals, but sometimes also solitary. The feeding flocks are restless and noisy, feeding at dusk and often continuing into darkness. The birds can break open crab shells easily with their powerful bill. If the prey is small, it is swallowed whole, if large, it's cut into pieces. Chicks are fed mainly on crabs brought back whole to the nest burrows. Some of them come to the entrance of the burrow to be fed, especially at night. Masirah boasts the only breeding grounds for crab plovers in Oman.

In Masirah, crab plovers can be found mainly on the west coast, on its Sur Masirah mudflats or in Marsis at low tide. Very few breeding colonies of this bird are known so far, but in Oman, it is regularly found in a few locations such as Khawr Jirama, Ad Duqm, Barr al Hikman and, of course, Masirah. *Thanks to Nancy Papathanasopoulou for this report, and to Colin, Aris, Hussein and Martin for their photographs.*

Admire That Jelly Fish At a Distance!



Willy and Helga Meyer, visiting the beaches despite the heat, reported that in June they found a lot of jelly fish in the water, some very blue, others more like milk.



Some blue, some milky

Helga got the short straw and paid dearly for holding the jelly fish while Willy photographed them. Her hands were blotched, stinging and blistered, though at the time she did not feel more than the odd gentle little sting. *Thanks to Willy and Helga Meyer for report and photographs.*

Salps: Jelly But Not Jelly Fish



Salps - strings of these little creatures
found in the sea break up easily
Photograph by Willy and Helga Meyer

Angela Manthorpe has provided the answer to Willy Meyer's question about the strings of tiny jelly creatures in the sea at this time of year. They are probably salps. A salp is a free floating tunicate and is barrel shaped. The brown spot that can be seen with the naked eye is the salp's stomach.

The salp moves by pumping water through its body, and as it does, it feeds on the phytoplankton in it. These tiny tunicates look insignificant, but occur in such enormous numbers in certain places such as the Southern Ocean that their faeces and dead bodies, falling to the ocean floor, contribute significantly to the ocean's carbon cycle.

A wealth of information about these fascinating creatures can be found on the internet, together with close-up photographs that show the animal's anatomy.

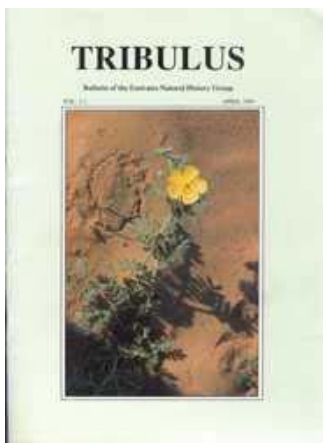




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Wanted: Old *Tribulus* Volumes

The ENHG journal, *Tribulus*, is in its fifteenth year of semi-annual publication. Since it began, it has become increasingly important as a source of published data about the natural history and archaeology of the Emirates. Much of the material published in *Tribulus* is available nowhere else.



As the journal continues to expand its reputation overseas, the Editorial

Board are receiving an increasing number of requests from overseas academic and other scientific institutions for sets of *Tribulus*. Unfortunately, it is not possible to meet all of these requests, since some of the issues are out of print, and reprinting would make no economic sense.

If any DNHG members are leaving the UAE, and do not want to take their copies of *Tribulus* with them, then the Editorial Board would be delighted to have them back! Anyone wishing to hand back copies should contact any member of the DNHG Committee, who will arrange to get the copies to the Editorial Board. Many thanks, in advance.

Snail Call: Snails and Slugs Wanted

Your unwanted land snails and slugs are of interest for scientific study and an accounting of the terrestrial and freshwater snails of the UAE. All specimens will be gratefully accepted by Chairman Gary Feulner, and contributors will be kept informed of progress and pedigrees. Dead shells are preferred; we'll follow up if you've got something unusual. There have already been a few surprises. It's easy. Just bag 'em and tag 'em! Please remember to record the location and the habitat, as well as your name, the date, and any remarks.

Members' Night December 6

This is your chance to make a 20 minute presentation on the natural history subject of your choice. Be in!! Angela Manthorpe, DNHG Speaker Coordinator would like to hear from you. Email Angela at: manthorpe2005@yahoo.co.uk

Dubai Natural History Group Programme

Lectures at Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, 7.30 for 8.00pm

Sep 13	Michael Creamer - Early Ships, Navigation and Trade Round the World
Oct 4	Steve James - Wildlife of the Extreme North-east of India
Nov 1	Jane Budd (Sharjah Breeding Centre) - 'The Arabian Leopard'
Dec 6	Members' Night

Field Trips (Members only, please.)

Late Sep	Proposed Birding Trip
Oct 9 (TBC)	Al Ain Oasis Tour and Flint Knapping Workshop with Gary Feulner

Field trips for this and the coming month will be announced / confirmed by e-mail circular.